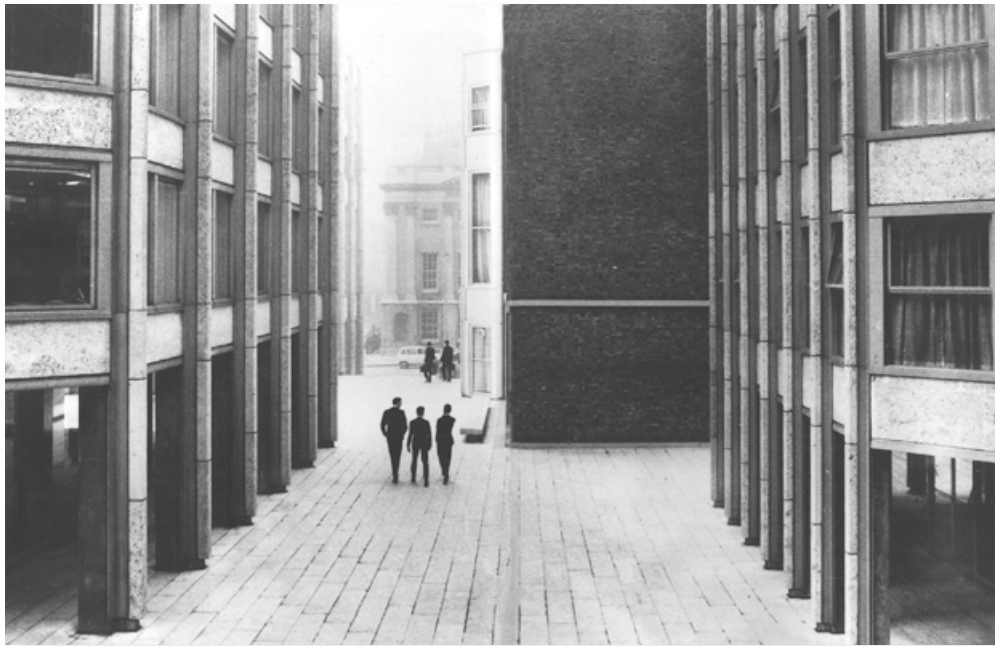


Deborah Saunt, Tom Greenall
and Roberta Marcaccio

COLLECTIVE IMPRESSIONS OF SMITHSON PLAZA



WEAVING HISTORY WITH THE PRESENT

Economist Plaza,
London,
1964 and 2016

Views from Bury Street, across the plaza towards St James's Street.

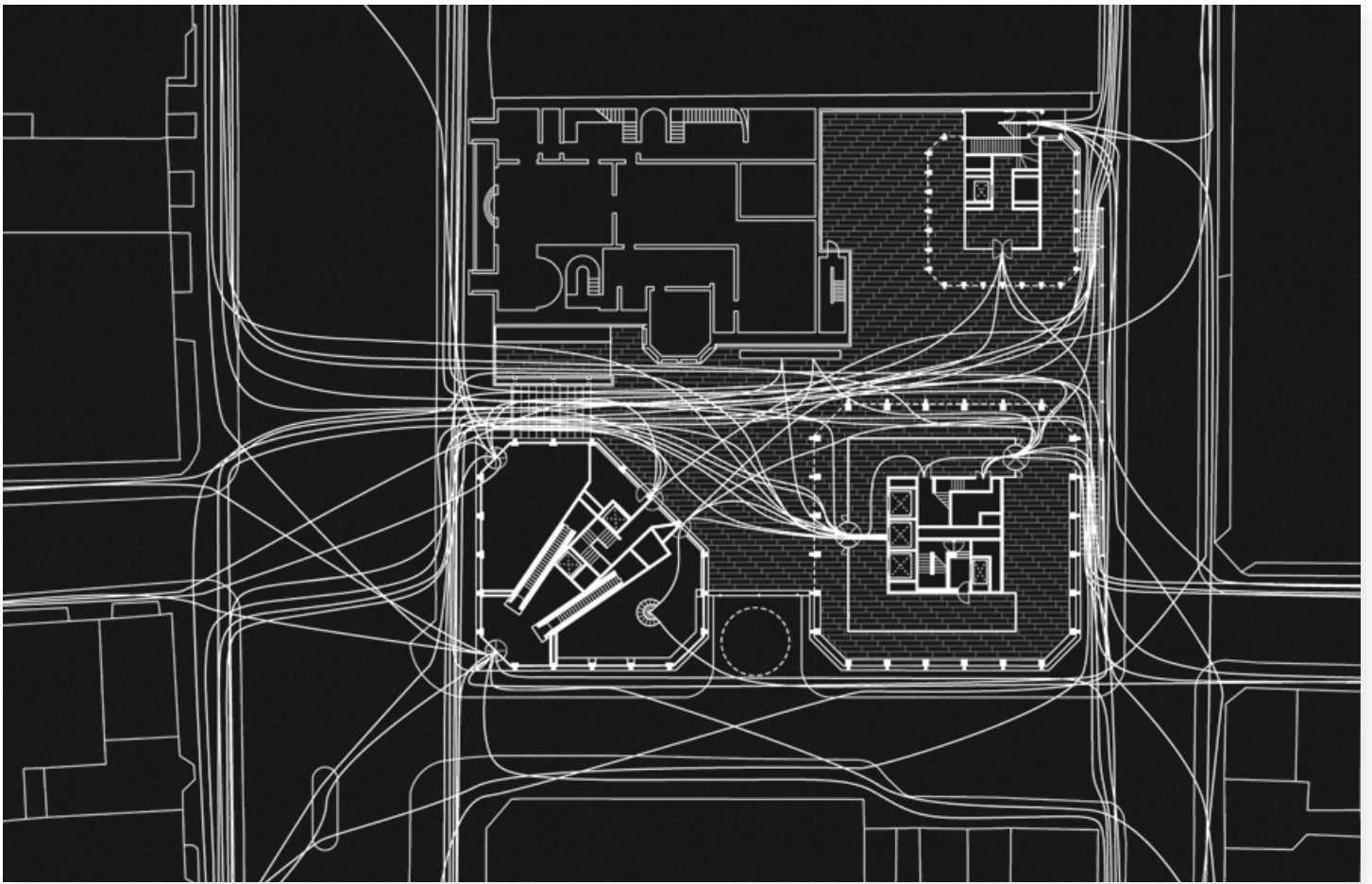
Opposite left: Original design by the Smithsons photographed by Michael Carapetian in 1964.

Middle: The space as it appeared in 2016 after SOM's alterations were carried out in 1990.

Below: DSDHA's proposed areas of intervention (in red) to 'edit out' the elements that have departed from the Smithsons' original design intent.



Designed by Alison and Peter Smithson in the early 1960s, the former Economist Plaza in London is an icon of the modern movement. Its recent restoration by architectural firm DSDHA drew on the Smithsons' own post-occupancy appraisals, as well as consultation with scholars who revealed the complex's choreographed nature. What was initially a retrofit with environmental performance enhancements thus evolved into a strategy to reinstate lost dynamism. Guest-Editors **Deborah Saunt, Tom Greenall and Roberta Marcaccio** – all key members of the DSDHA team – tell its story.



DSDHA,
Economist Plaza movement analysis,
London, 2016

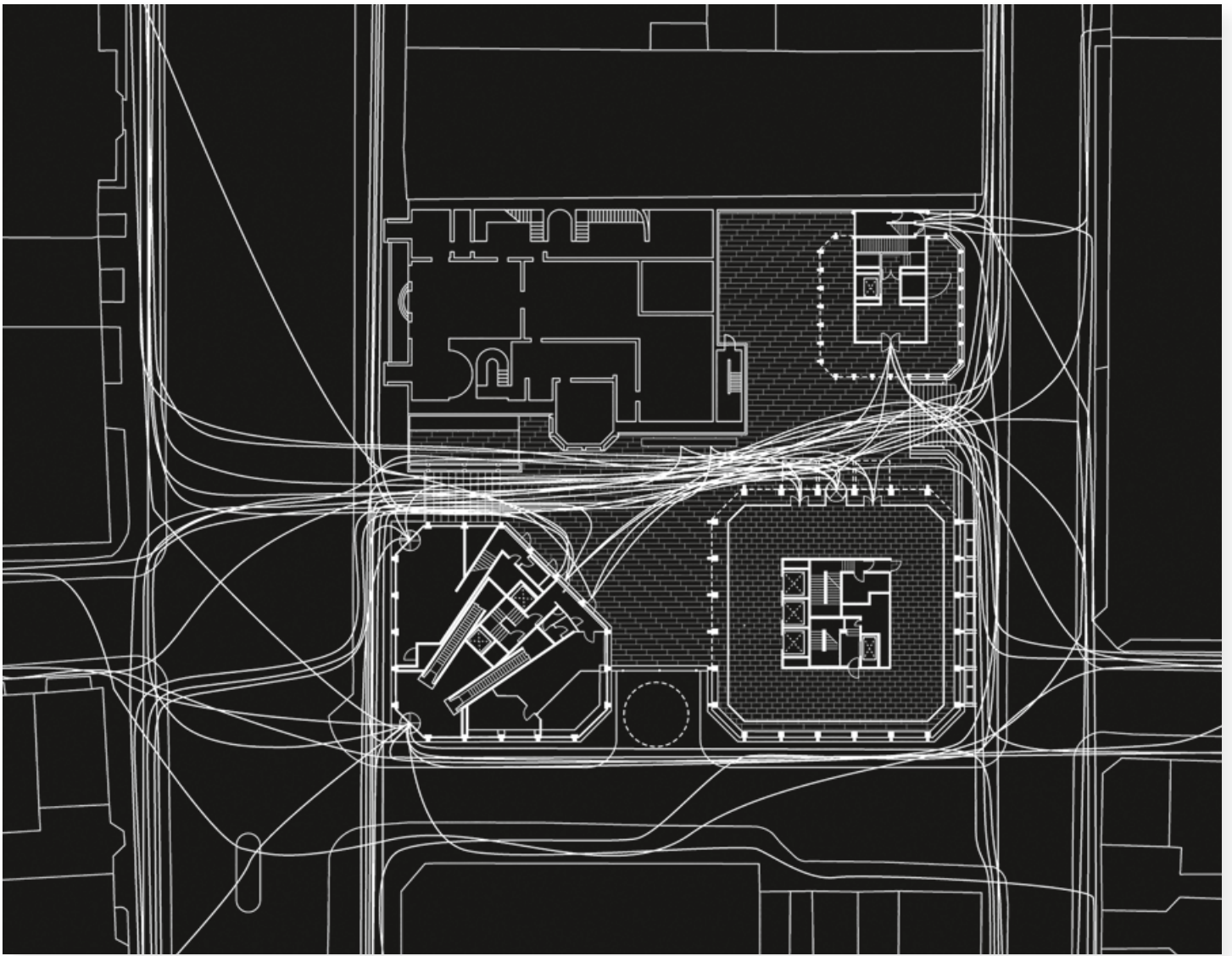
above: DSDHA's movement analysis of the plaza as it was intended by the Smithsons in 1964, upon completion of their project.

opposite: Movement analysis of the space after SOM's reworking in 1990. DSDHA's design proposals aimed to transform the plaza's choreography of movement to bring back its original dynamism.

After its completion in 1964, Alison and Peter Smithson continually revisited the Economist Plaza to make new appraisals which they then crystallised in writing, drawing and photographs. As part of their restoration of the complex (now renamed Smithson Plaza), DSDHA studied these documents closely, alongside other existing literature, and conducted first-hand research on the ground, observing how people occupy and move through the space. All this informed their project, the first phase of which was completed in July 2018 and has seen the plaza resurfaced, with new lobbies for both the residential and office towers. Four floors of the residential tower have been retrofitted and six floors of the office tower were renovated to create approximately 2,000 square metres (21,530 square feet) of Grade A work spaces. The latter's environmental performance was enhanced through the installation of new double-glazed windows, insulation and discreet new services and lifts. At street level the scheme has created a new art gallery, while a public art programme has been reintroduced at the plaza level to revive the long and established tradition of the space as a prominent stage for London's creative scene.

Change: An Idea to Keep

One of London's most beloved architectural icons, the Economist Plaza featured prominently in journals, history books, fashion shoots and cult films such as Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966). In 1988, it was Grade II* listed, and for the past 50 years has been a compulsory destination for any architectural student interested in the modern movement. As such both the architectural community and town planners were quite sceptical of any suggested alteration. To establish a constructive dialogue, DSDHA studied the Smithsons' attitude towards change. In their writings the duo described the Plaza as an open-ended, highly flexible set of buildings composed of elements with both long-term and short-term lifespans. The former are 'permanent' design gestures that have impact at an urban scale and as such resist change. The latter are instead 'transient' elements – like the technological appliances or prefabricated components – that can be replaced more regularly when a new technology becomes available or new uses require new configurations.



Faithful to these principles, the Smithsons themselves carried out alterations to the entrance of the office tower in 1984, when having been a headquarters for one single organisation, the building became a multi-tenanted block. Further and clearly less successful changes occurred in the 1990s during Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's major reworking of the complex, which included the expansion of the office lobby into the colonnade, the remodelling of the stepped access to the plaza on Bury Street, and a series of extensions on the same prospect. Moreover, the bank occupying the lowest of the three blocks departed and a restaurant took over, latterly fitted out by Kenzo Kuma with dark tinted windows that have destroyed the building's visual permeability. DSDHA mapped these little-known alterations, distinguishing those in keeping with the Smithsons' visions from those that departed from it and therefore needed to be addressed in the new scheme.

A Choreography of Movements

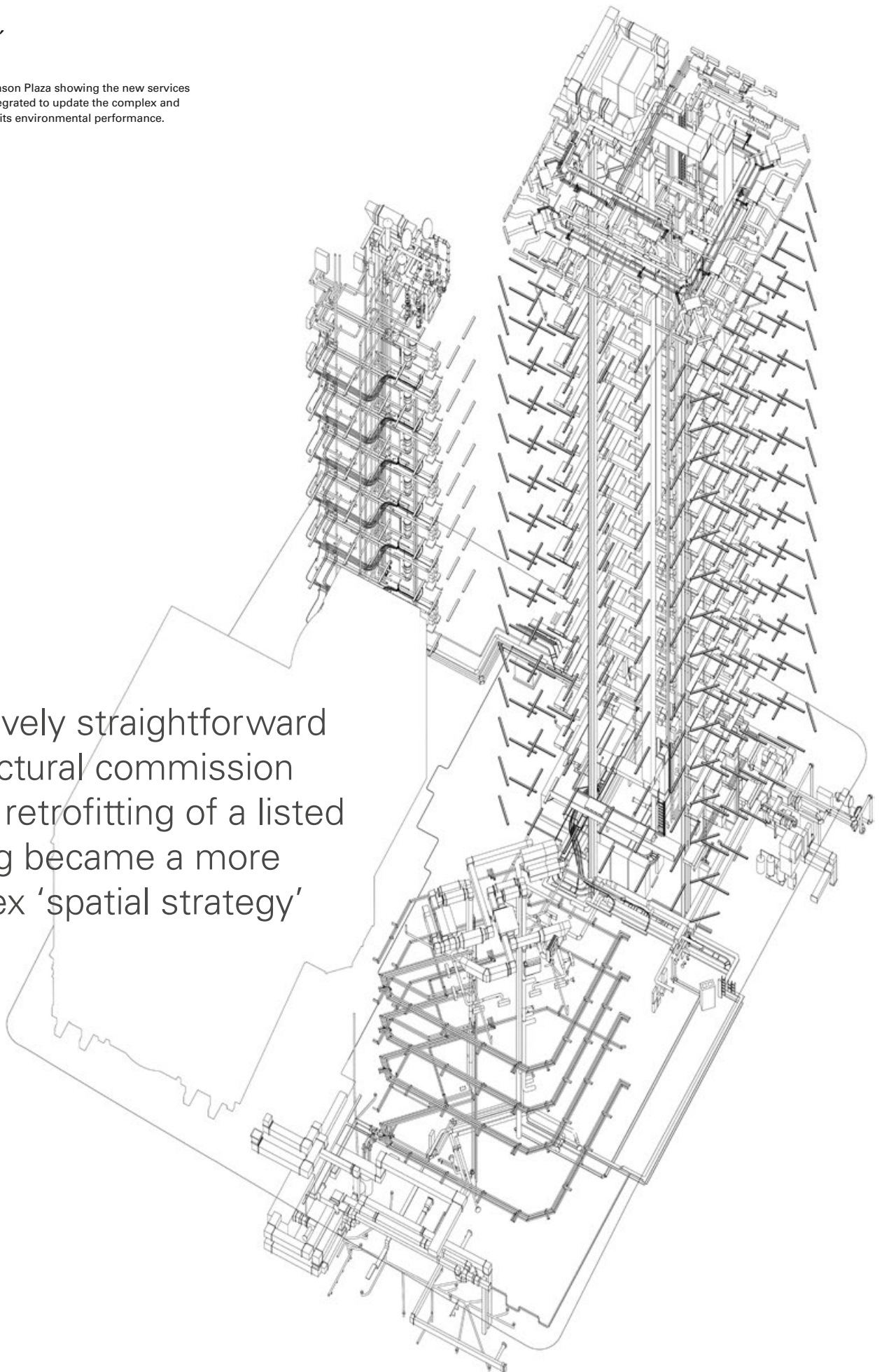
In conversation with distinguished scholars (Professors Susannah Hagan from Westminster University, and Max Risselada and Dirk van den Heuvel from the Delft

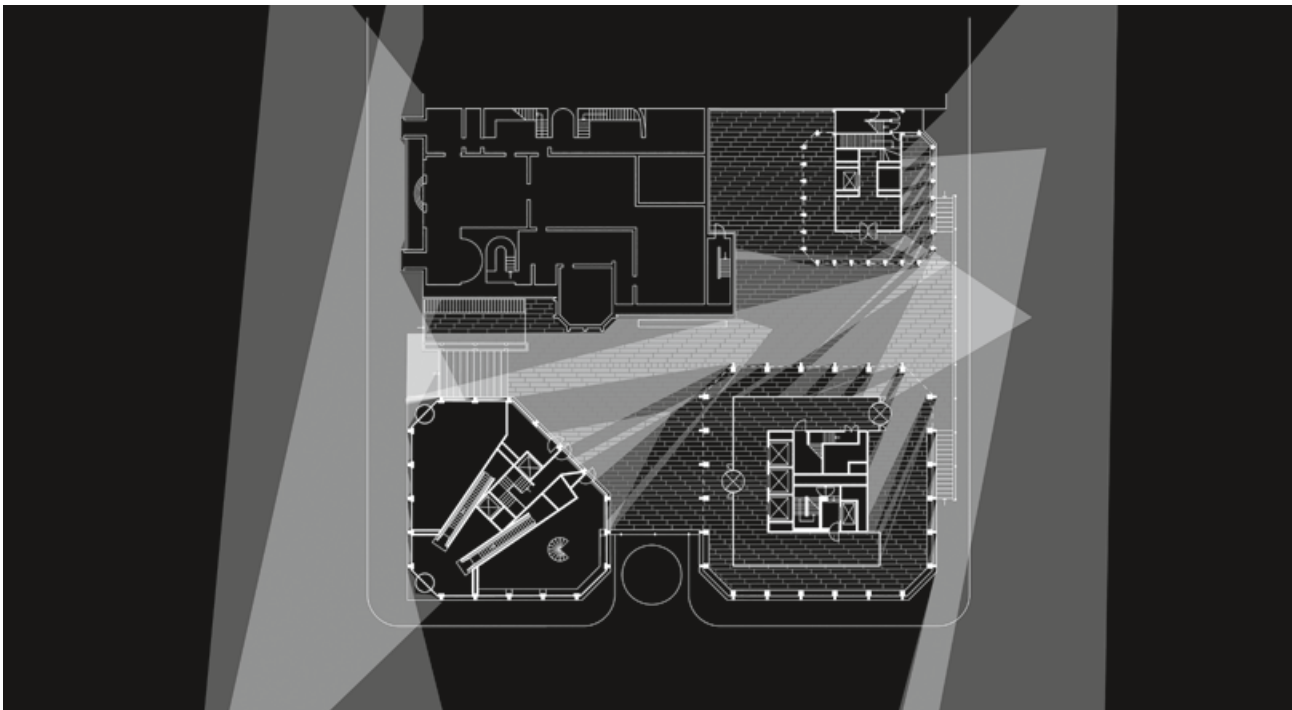
University of Technology), DSDHA uncovered that the Smithsons had conceived their three buildings as elements of the townscape, to be experienced kinetically according to a precise choreography of movements and views towards and through the cluster. DSDHA then mapped the original patterns of movement and revealed how the intrinsic dynamism of the complex was subtly eroded by each subsequent change. The result was that the plaza had become less vital, and this public space's celebrated quietude had mutated into an efficient thoroughfare towards the office tower with undesirable views into the restaurant's back-of-house. The aim of the new scheme was to restore this lost dynamism and define an urban choreography more attuned to the 21st century.

To this end, DSDHA also catalogued the photographs the Smithsons had commissioned for their multiple accounts of their project. The team established the exact location from which the views had been taken and mapped their cones of visibility to identify the extent of the complex captured by each image. The aim was to establish a visual/spatial hierarchy, distinguishing the most iconic views – elements to be restored to the

Axonometric of Smithson Plaza showing the new services
DSDHA discreetly integrated to update the complex and
significantly upgrade its environmental performance.

A relatively straightforward
architectural commission
for the retrofitting of a listed
building became a more
complex 'spatial strategy'





DSDHA,
Overlay of historical views of the Economist Plaza,
London,
2016

Having catalogued the photographs the Smithsons themselves had commissioned and/or published, DSDHA established the exact location from which each had been taken and mapped their cones of visibility before overlaying them onto the original plan from 1964. In so doing, the practice could identify areas which, having not been featured in any of the publications curated by the Smithsons, were perhaps less significant in townscape terms, and, as such, could be updated to meet the demands of contemporary office, gallery and public space.

original design intent as much as possible for their importance in townscape terms – from the lesser-known and perhaps less successful angles, where the complex could be updated to meet the demands of contemporary office, gallery and public space. This led to the proposal to turn the carpark entrance on Ryder Street, which does not appear in any historical photos, into a gallery space and, in future phases of the project, insert a new discreet staircase that will make the raised plaza accessible to the south.

Through these research methods, DSDHA could debunk the myth of the Economist Plaza as an untouchable icon. The practice's methodologies acted as a rhetorical tool to substantiate hunches, but moreover allowed a series of discoveries that guided the design, even steering the project beyond its initial scope. In this way a relatively straightforward architectural commission for the retrofitting of a listed building became a more complex 'spatial strategy' that encompassed elements of the urban landscape, and evolved as a bespoke response to the heritage value of the building to inject new life into the city. DSDHA's historical research and related design tools are now informing new projects as well as becoming the subject of academic papers and lectures that will hopefully further studies of the Smithsons' work. Δ



DSDHA,
Smithson Plaza,
London,
2018

The DSDHA team on the plaza after its recent renovation. From left to right: Eleanor Alexander, Martin Pearson, Robert Eaton, Roberta Marcaccio, Sanket Ghatalia, Deborah Saunt and David Hills.

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